BEYOND THE PALE

A reunion between

PRESIDENT MIKHAIL GORBACHEV & SECRETARY OF STATE GEORGE SHULTZ

Moderated by Charlie Rose

2009 EMMA LAZARUS STATUE OF LIBERTY AWARD PRESENTED TO KENNETH J. BIALKIN

AJHS GLOBAL LEADERSHIP AWARD PRESENTED TO PRESIDENT GORBACHEV

SPECIAL INSERT RETRACING THE CAREER OF YIDDISH THEATER LEGEND MOLLY PACON

FROM THE AJHS ARCHIVES... A PEEK AT OUR ARCHIVES' MOST ENTERTAINING TREASURES, CURRENTLY ON EXHIBIT IN NEW YORK
Dear Friends:

This year the Emma Lazarus Statue of Liberty Award Luncheon celebrated a reunion between former President Mikhail Gorbachev and former U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz moderated by Charlie Rose. The conversation was about the emigration of Soviet Jewry and other minorities from the Soviet Union and the normalization of relations between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. The Society presented its newly created Global Leadership Award to President Gorbachev and its Emma Lazarus Statue of Liberty Award to our Chairman Emeritus Kenneth Bialkin. This issue of HERITAGE contains pictures and remarks made at the event. We were honored with the presence of former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, former U.S. Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill, former New York City Mayor Ed Koch, American Jewish Committee Executive Director David Harris and Israeli Ambassador to the UN Gabriela Shalev.

The luncheon was two years in the making. We were fortunate that the paths of President Gorbachev and Secretary of State Shultz crossed on March 26 in New York City and so we were able to host these world leaders at a luncheon at the Rainbow Room. Motivating our interest in having Charlie Rose stimulate the dialogue between Gorbachev and Shultz was our burning interest in ascertaining how much Gorbachev’s decisions were influenced by the American Soviet Jewry movement. It was apparent that the efforts of the movement were successful in causing President Reagan and Secretary of State Shultz to put the issue of the emigration of Soviet Jewry at the top of Reagan’s foreign policy agenda. The Society’s records contain a significant amount of the Soviet Jewry movement’s archives and they will now include a recording of this event.

We were thrilled that Secretary of State Shultz disregarded prepared remarks and warmly embraced the significant role played by Ken Bialkin in heading the Soviet Jewry movement and pursuing the collection of its records for the Society. Our Chairman Sid Lapidus delivered a stirring tribute to President Gorbachev, awarding him the first Global Leadership Award.

During Charlie Rose’s interview numerous and important remarks concerning the Gorbachev/Reagan and Shultz relationship were discussed. Rather than summarizing them in this letter watch the April 21 Charlie Rose broadcast online at www.charlierose.com/view/interview/10246.

The event was successful intellectually, emotionally, and financially. However, the Society, like all not-for-profits, has been deeply impacted by the downturn in the economy. We have survived for 117 years during recessions and the Great Depression. We will be serving our constituency for many more years with your help and our restraint. There is much more to share with you but I’d rather end by including a letter we received from George Shultz that is a source of an enormous pride to the Society.

Thank you.

Daniel R. Kaplan, President

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Wayne Hoffman, guest editor, is managing editor of special projects at Nextbook. He previously served as an editor at the Forward, Billboard magazine, and the New York Blade, and his cultural reporting has appeared in the Washington Post, The Nation, the Village Voice, and elsewhere.

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Oren Rawls is a freelance journalist based in New York. His writing has been published in the Los Angeles Times, Miami Herald, Baltimore Sun, Al Hayat, and Asia Times, among other publications.

Writer and performer Caraid O’Brien received three new play commissions from the Foundation for Jewish Culture for her translations of classic Yiddish plays. She also contributed an essay on Yiddish theater to A Living Lens: Photographs of Jewish Life from the Pages of the Forward.

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American Jewish Historical Society

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“We must never forget those who went through those terrible trials and tribulations,” said former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev at the 2009 American Jewish Historical Society Emma Lazarus Statue of Liberty Award luncheon, held on March 26 at New York’s Rainbow Room. “What is dangerous is forgetfulness.” The luncheon, titled “Beyond the Pale,” marked two decades since the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the global realignment that followed.

Kenneth J. Bialkin was the recipient of the 2009 Emma Lazarus Statue of Liberty Award. Gorbachev, who was awarded AJHS’s first Global Leadership Award, was joined at the event by former U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz in conversation with PBS’s Charlie Rose about their crucial roles in ending the Cold War and the emigration of some one million Soviet Jews. (The conversation was broadcast on the April 21 edition of the Charlie Rose Show.)

The Gorbachev/Shultz/Rose conversation touched on Russo-American relations today, the future of nuclear arms proliferation and negotiations with Iran, optimism for the Obama and Medvedev administrations, and the role of Russian Jews in Israeli politics today. In recalling their early meetings, both Shultz and Gorbachev emphasized the human qualities that drew Reagan and Gorbachev together—a commitment to family and recognition of common humanity.

AJHS Chairman emeritus Kenneth J. Bialkin received the award for his lifetime of leadership and contributions to the Jewish people and to Israel, and for founding the Archive of the American Soviet Jewry Movement at AJHS.

Shultz abandoned prepared remarks to speak from the heart, and praised Bialkin for his persistent advocacy at the highest levels of government on behalf of Soviet Jews, saying that when Gorbachev came to power, “we both sensed that change had come.” Gorbachev corroborated the role of American Jewish advocacy on behalf of Soviet Jews, noting, “Reagan mentioned it at every meeting.”

AJHS President Daniel R. Kaplan produced the event as a warm tribute to Bialkin, his lifelong friend.

Among the 270 attendees were former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger; former Treasury Secretary Paul O’Neill; former New York City Mayor Ed Koch; members of law and financial firms; and the heads of major Jewish organizations, UJA/Federation, the American Jewish Committee, and the Center for Jewish History.
PAST WINNERS

OF THE EMMA LAZARUS
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Armand Hammer, 1987
Edgar M. Bronfman, 1989
Sylvia Hassenfeld, 1994
Aaron Feuerstein, 1996
Beverly Sills, 1998
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Sanford I. Weill, 2000
Ambassador Felix G. Rohatyn, 2001
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Mortimer B. Zuckerman, 2003
Hon. Edward I. Koch, 2005
Hon. George P. Shultz, 2007
Sid Lapidus, 2008

SEE

“Beyond the Pale: A reunion between President Mikhail Gorbachev & Secretary of State George Shultz”

MODERATED BY CHARLIE ROSE ONLINE AT
www.charlierose.com/view/interview/10246
American Jewish Committee Executive Director DAVID HARRIS prepared opening remarks for the event and praised Secretary Shultz for his role; here is an excerpt:

“For our country, the plight of Soviet Jews became a central item on our bilateral agenda and for the Congress. Israel, despite the absence of direct links with the USSR, found many ways to give hope and support to Jews in the Soviet Union. The Helsinki Final Act, signed in 1975 by 35 nations, including the USSR and all of Europe, gave the Soviet Jewry movement an additional lever by calling for the protection of human rights. And countless non-Jews responded. From Martin Luther King Jr. to Bayard Rustin, from Sister Ann Gillen to Father Robert Drinan, they stood up, their voices were heard, and their message was clear—Let them live freely as Jews in the Soviet Union, or let them go.

Try as the Soviet Union might, it could not quell the growing storm of protest. If the Kremlin relaxed its stance on emigration, as it did in 1973 and 1979, more Jews rushed to seek permission to leave. If it tightened its stance, as it did after the Moscow Olympics in 1980, then the global outcry intensified. And so we come at last to the Reagan-Gorbachev era. Few could have predicted its auspicious outcome.

Certainly, when we were asked to organize a mass rally in Washington, on the eve of President Gorbachev’s first visit in 1987, little could we have foreseen the extraordinary events of the next four years … Not too long afterward, President Gorbachev opened the gates, and the Jews came streaming out. Of course, only President Gorbachev knows the degree to which this and other rallies and protests affected the decision-making of the Kremlin. I do know that, for the mood and morale of Soviet Jews, they were vitally important. The knowledge that the United States stood with them in their struggle was extraordinarily powerful. And there are few American officials who embody that support more than George Shultz. No words are sufficient to describe the central role he played, or the message he sent, when, as secretary of state, he hosted a Passover Seder for Soviet Jewish activists at the American Embassy in Moscow in 1987…

It’s a perfect reminder of the power of individuals to dream dreams and fulfill them, as Soviet Jews did. And of the capacity of true statesmen to chart a brighter future and achieve it, as our two distinguished guests did so magnificently.”

“The American Jewish Historical Society created history on March 26th. . . At a time when the world seems down on one knee, the reminder of what can be, through the efforts of leaders of vision and courage determined to be authors of history, becomes all the more important.”

David Harris, Executive Director of the American Jewish Committee
Many of you in this room remember the time when Jews could not leave the confines of the Soviet Union, they were virtual prisoners there. Some of you were among the thousands of activists who marched, struggled, and prayed for the freedom of Soviet Jews, or who visited the Soviet Union and clandestinely brought prayer books, matzohs, food, money, and hope to our brothers and sisters while seeking to evade the notice or intimidation of the KGB. Some here do not directly remember the struggle and did not attend the glorious rally on December 7, 1987, in Washington, D.C., where more than 250,000 people demonstrated for the freedom of Soviet Jews. They were no longer the Jews of Silence, which Elie Wiesel described in 1966. Second only perhaps to the support for Israel which united and continues to unite the Jews of America in fighting for the freedom and safety of the State of Israel, the American movement to free Soviet Jews represents an unprecedented achievement of the force of community action to achieve an international political result of remarkable significance."
Soviet Jewry Archive Preserves a Moment When American Jews Came Together

Among the items Leslie Schaffer packed for a trip to the Soviet Union in 1982 were packs of Wrigley’s Juicy Fruit. A taste of home for the native of Reno, Nev., the sticks of chewing gum offered some of those she met during her travels a taste of something else: freedom.

Scribbled on the backside of the bright yellow gum wrappers were the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of refuseniks, Soviet Jews who had been denied permission to emigrate and who often suffered for expressing their wish to do so. Schaffer smuggled the information out of the Soviet Union and upon returning home delivered it to American activists struggling to free Soviet Jewry.

Schaffer’s effort was but one of thousands made by the Soviet Jewry movement in the United States, a grassroots campaign from the 1960s to the ’90s that placed the plight of Jews trapped behind the Iron Curtain on the agenda in Washington. Her gum wrappers, and hundreds of thousands more items and documents, can today be found in the Archive of the American Soviet Jewry Movement.

Established by the American Jewish Historical Society in 2006, the archive is the most comprehensive collection of material dedicated to the American Soviet Jewry movement. It was the brainchild of AJHS Chairman Emeritus Kenneth J. Bialkin, whose tireless fundraising efforts underwrote much of the collecting and processing effort. Each item in the archive offers a tale all of its own; taken together, the collection tells the story of what was perhaps the seminal moment in modern American Jewish history.
“The American Soviet Jewry movement represented an extraordinary confluence of effort by American Jews and others—often working in concert, sometimes not—to effect a major change in Soviet policy and ultimately the free emigration of Jews,” says Bialkin. “The movement inspired political engagement and both communal and individual activism at so many levels across the entire spectrum of Jewish life in the United States.”

For nearly three years, AJHS archivists and a team of interns, have worked full-time preserving and organizing a treasure trove of material related to the American Soviet Jewry movement. What began as a National Endowment for the Arts-backed effort to archive six different collections of various sizes has since doubled in scale, including sizable new acquisitions from the University of Colorado and Chicago Action for Soviet Jewry, as well as donations from individuals who learned of AJHS’s archival effort.

Far from relegating the vast collection to dusty bins in a storage cellar, the archivists have made the material easily accessible to professional and casual researchers alike. The AJHS team meticulously catalogued approximately 700 boxes of documents, then developed electronic “finding aids” to allow for searching the archive by either subject area or search term.

Available online at www.ajhs.org/aasjm, the user-friendly finding aids are accompanied by a wealth of information to help locate and understand the material. A summary description is provided for each collection in the archive, as are notes about both the assembling of the collection and the historical context of its contents.

The collections are also catalogued online by call number, making it a cinch to find their contents’ physical location in the fifth-floor stacks at AJHS’s Manhattan headquarters. Visitors can review materials two floors below the archive in a reading room staffed Monday through Thursday by a member of the archival staff. Archivist Vital Zajka and his colleagues also field reference requests, which can be made by phone, email, fax, or good old-fashioned mail.

What may not be immediately evident to those who browse the stacks at 15 West 16th Street are the efforts made by the archivists to preserve the collections with which they were entrusted. Documents were re-housed in acid-free folders and boxes to prevent decay. Audio and video recordings, meanwhile, were digitally reformatted, and master copies were sent to an off-site secure storage facility to preserve the collections’ irreplaceable contents for future generations.

“The American Jewish Historical Society cannot possibly absorb all the documents that reflect the American Soviet Jewry movement,” says Susan Malbin, AJHS director of library and archives. “But we hope that our effort will encourage regional Jewish historical societies and other institutions to develop parallel archives, thereby ensuring that the scholars of tomorrow will have access to primary source material that, in total, represents as complete a record as possible of this important period in modern Jewish history.”
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THE SCRAPBOOKS OF
MOLLY PICON
PAGES FROM A PERFORMING LIFE
SEND IN THE CLOWN

MOLLY PICON

ENDURES AS THE ICONIC FACE OF YIDDISH THEATER

By Caraid O’Brien
WITH A PERSONA UNLIKE ANY OTHER

Yiddish performer, Molly Picon boxed her way to the forefront of Yiddish popular culture. At a time when her fellow leading ladies were powerful matriarchs and sexy sirens, she became a headliner on Second Avenue playing yeshiva boys, orphan girls, and street urchins. Her childlike androgyny allowed her to alchemically shape-shift across age, gender, and language into myriad characters, all stamped with her trademark moxie. This acrobatic actress was the rarest of comedienne: a true clown, one who came to symbolize not only a generation but an entire theatrical tradition.

One of the first and certainly the last of the American-born stars of the Yiddish stage, Picon could play on either side of Second Avenue—and she did. She began her career in English vaudeville doing impressions of Charlie Chaplin and Eddie Cantor. Stranded in Boston when the English-language theaters closed during the flu epidemic of 1918, Picon auditioned for the local Yiddish theater and its manager, Jacob Kalich.

The yeshiva dropout from Galicia recognized Picon’s star power immediately, and together they devised an ingenious plan to make her the most memorable Yiddish theater performer of the 20th century. Although her future husband schooled her in the Jewish milieu, Picon was an American kid shaped by American values, influenced as much by Chaplin and Mary Pickford as she was by Jacob Adler and Boris Thomashefsky. A signature Picon move of blowing up the curl that always fell across her right eye telegraphed her pluck as a character, a willingness to power through whatever obstacle fell across her path.

With Kalich, she traveled to Eastern Europe as a visiting American star, inventing the character of Molly Picon, perfecting her Chaplinesque ragamuffin winsomeness over a two-year period. Mission accomplished, she returned to New York as a headliner on Second Avenue, billed as the latest sensation from Europe.

Picon and Kalich both contributed to the creation of her persona so much so that one of her most famous roles was that of Yonkele, the yeshiva boy, who embodied the earnest desire for a better world that Kalich must have had when at 15 he ran off to follow a traveling Yiddish theater company that had borrowed his kapote for a costume. While Picon composed her own lyrics, Kalich wrote most of her plays, drawing from her real-life rags-to-riches story for inspiration.

Picon’s mother, abandoned by her polygamist husband, supported the family as a dresser in the Yiddish theater. Molly contributed her earnings as Baby Margaret, working talent shows, nickelodeons, and tram cars from the age of 5. Baby Margaret remained at the heart of her persona throughout her career. In the autobiographical play O What a Life that opened in Yiddish on Broadway in 1942, every quality that made Picon unique was used by the hapless theater owner as proof she would never be a star: her boyish figure, her pixie face, her lower singing voice, her size (“she’s as big as my stovepipe”), her name. Even the fact that she was born in America made her bid for stardom an unlikely gambit.

Picon’s characters operated within their own moral code and often exposed the moral shortcomings of others. Like much of the material from the Yiddish theater, her scripts had an edgy side. In Tsipke, as the abused daughter of an alcoholic, she attempts to swindle the wealthy family of a recently deceased soldier by pretending to be his widow. When it turns out the soldier is not dead, however, it is Tsipke who comes across as a devoted woman of character and ends up engaged to the soldier anyway, exposing his original fiancee as the shallow rich girl she is. (“Scandalous!” as the fiancee says in English.)

Picon was a pioneer of film, television, and radio. She made her film debut in Austria in 1921. She began doing radio in New York in the late 1920s. As a television actress, she went from being the hardscrabble street-kid dreaming about making it big to playing the sitcom grandmother who drove everyone nuts. This fluidity among genres and languages ensured her enduring legacy. She tirelessly moved through the 20th century, criss-crossing oceans, mastering mediums—stage, screen, and radio—switching out English for Yiddish and Yiddish for English.

That a female clown is the enduring emblem of the Yiddish theater says much about the language and its culture. Yiddish, after all, is the mameleshn, the mother tongue from a tradition known for its defiant brand of humor. Women in the Yiddish theater were always powerful; they were their own headliners, their own producers, their own money makers. Picon transcended gender, however, playing men, women, and children with ease. Even singing love songs, she was not sexy as much as she was winsome, innocent, and lovable.

As American as it was Jewish, the persona of the indomitable and irresistible Lower East Sider that Picon and Kalich created was a brilliant invention, combining elements of Chaplin’s artful dodger with Pickford’s iconic hard luck girl and translating them into a Jewish milieu. From yeshiva boys to orphan girls, the character of Molly Picon, the physical embodiment of the triumph of the American spirit in Yiddish, was a creation on par with Chaplin’s tramp so much so that Molly Picon’s legacy continues to define and even dominate memories of an entire theatrical movement that spanned a century and included hundreds of talented artists.

CARAID O’BRIEN HAS WRITTEN ARTICLES IN ENGLISH AND YIDDISH FOR THE FORWARD, LILITH MAGAZINE, BROADWAY.COM, DER PAKENTREGER, YIDDISHE KULTUR, AND OTHERS.

OPPOSITE: MOLLY PICON IN CIRCUS GIRL, SECOND AVENUE THEATER, NY 1922; ON THE INSERT COVER: MOLLY PICON WEARING A KITTEL IN THE RABBI’S MELODY, SECOND AVENUE THEATER, NY, 1926
THROUGHOUT THEIR MORE THAN 50 years together, Molly Picon, the “Darling of the Yiddish theater,” and her husband and collaborator Jacob (Yonkel) Kalich kept scrapbooks brimming with clippings, reviews and interviews, fan letters, programs, telegrams, and other ephemera. Spanning the years 1919 to 1967, primarily in Yiddish and English, the scrapbooks reveal Picon’s best self: her love of Yiddish theater and her audience, her tireless work ethic, and her longevity as a performer. Molly’s scrapbooks chronicle her prolific career in real time and as she and Yankel wanted to remember it.

Pages From a Performing Life, currently on display at the Center for Jewish History in New York, provides a glimpse beyond Molly Picon’s international career and into the yiddishkeit of her abundant life. The exhibit draws on the Molly Picon Papers, which include 22 scrapbooks, at the American Jewish Historical Society as well as material from the collections of the YIVO Institute, a fellow partner at the Center for Jewish History.

In these pages, we offer our readers a small taste of the exhibit.
Molly was born Margaret Pyekoon to Clara Ostrovsky and Louis Pyekoon on the Lower East Side. At age 5, Molly made her stage debut, winning a local talent competition. Feeling pressure to support her single mother, Molly left school as a teenager to join an English-language vaudeville troupe. Her life changed dramatically in 1918 when she met Jacob (Yonkel) Kalich, who would become her husband, her manager, and creator of many of her roles on the Yiddish stage.

“When we met in Boston, I was the All-American Girl full of hurdy-gurdys and absolutely illiterate about Jewish culture. Yonkel, on the other hand, was the complete intellectual who knew not only classic Yiddish but its plays, theater and writers.”

Shortly after they married in 1919, Yonkel and Molly toured the “Jewish” cities of eastern Europe so that she could improve her Yiddish and gain performing experience.

On their return to New York, Yonkel kept writing songs and shows to highlight Molly’s skills. Molly quickly became a sensation on Second Avenue and beyond. Between 1925 and 1929, she opened eight new plays and took them on tour, performing for Jewish theater audiences from coast to coast. Molly’s scrapbooks testify to her incessant schedule and rave reviews.

In 1929, Broadway called and Molly made her first appearance “uptown” at the Palace with Sophie Tucker in a vaudeville-style revue. Tucker played in Yiddish and Molly performed her own material translated into English. As a performer, Molly relished her success in front of a new and often critical audience.
MOLLY TAKES LATIN AMERICA

Supported by an Argentinean benefactor, Molly played Latin America in the early 1930s, including 138 sold-out shows in Buenos Aires. By the time they packed up to return home, Molly had become “an institution in that city, having dresses, hats and even a restaurant named after her.”

Molly returned to the United States to play Chicago and Washington, only to leave soon after to play Europe again and then for Hebrew-speaking Jews in Palestine for the first time—where she played in Yiddish. Though she was out of political fashion, her audience of kibbutzniks loved it.
1936–1938

ON THE SILVER SCREEN

Molly began 1936 on radio, hosting the Maxwell House Coffee Program on WHN, returning to Poland with Yonkel later that year so she could star in Yidl Mitn Fidl, the most successful Yiddish talkie to date. After production wrapped, Molly stayed in Warsaw to play a special concert and meet Yonkel’s mother, who still suspected that Molly and Yonkel’s line of work “wasn’t entirely kosher.”

After a brief spell at home, Molly and Yonkel returned to Poland so Molly could star in another Kalich production, Mamele. As filming ended, Molly felt the increasing pressure of growing tensions in Europe and cut a scheduled tour short to return to the States.

“I immediately began work on Mamele—40 years old, having to play a 12-year-old girl. The make-up man looked skeptical, and I didn’t blame him.”

THE LATE 1930S

GLOBAL MOLLY, LOCAL MOLLY

Molly’s scrapbooks and letters show her hard at work, playing England and South Africa, as she and Yonkel continued their frantic travel and performance schedule, covering over 50,000 miles, mostly by boat. Once home, her schedule remained as busy as ever: performing on radio. But Molly had grown tired of the Shmendricks and Yonkeles she had been playing for almost 20 years. Looking for something different, Molly jumped at the chance to play in English on Broadway, accepting a role as a “sophisticated New York Jewish woman” in Morning Star.

“I entered rehearsals for Morning Star eager to succeed in this new phase of my career—but I was a little uneasy as to just how to go about it. My anchor was the Yiddish stage. I had performed in its comedy melodrama, and helped write many of its songs, and I knew thoroughly how to entertain its audiences. Uptown, however, I felt a bit adrift.”
THE 1940S

MOLLY AND THE WAR EFFORT

Moved by the plight of children orphaned by World War II, Molly and Yonkel adopted George Weinstein, the first of four foster children they would welcome into their family. Cut off from Eastern Europe, she and Yonkel toured the United States, and Molly made her debut in Hollywood. She also signed on to work with the USO, visiting American army bases and tirelessly entertaining the troops.

In 1946, Molly and Yonkel played for survivors and displaced persons in Paris, Warsaw, Lodz, and many places in between. Following the war, they dedicated time and energy to entertaining troops during the Korean War, and to selling bonds for the new State of Israel.

“While there was very little I could do to turn Korea’s dismal situation around, I rededicated myself to piling up bucks for Israel, the more the better.”

1950–1970

OFF SECOND AVE, ON BROADWAY

With Jewish life on the Lower East Side slowly disappearing, and Broadway in a slump, Molly and Yonkel continued their work on the “bonds belt.” To Molly’s great delight, Yonkel scored a role in the television adaptation of Leo Rosten’s The Education of H*Y*M*A*N K*A*P*L*A*N.

After a tour of Israel and two more Kalich plays, Molly replaced Gertrude Berg as the lead in Majority of One, which she opened in London to rave reviews. Molly followed her success with a lead role in Jerry Herman’s first Broadway musical, Milk and Honey, which earned her first Tony Award nomination. Then, she played Frank Sinatra’s Italian mother in 1963’s Come Blow Your Horn, for which she received a Golden Globe nomination.

In 1971, her iconic status solidified, Molly took the role of Yente the Matchmaker in Norman Jewison’s film version of Fiddler on the Roof. Perhaps the only thing that made her prouder than her own contribution was Yonkel’s turn as Anatevka’s melamed (teacher).
1970s AND BEYOND

MOLLY’S LEGACY

After Yonkel’s death in 1975, Molly found solace on the stage. She continued working a rigorous schedule, appearing in her own one-woman show, *Hello Molly*, well into her 80s, before succumbing to Alzheimer’s disease in 1992 at the age of 94.

While adoring audiences could see her anywhere for one night, her scrapbooks offer a long view of her career and a glimpse into Molly’s love for Yonkel, for Yiddish, for the stage, for her audiences, and for Jewish people worldwide.

*Pages From a Performing Life* was curated by Ari Y. Kelman, Assistant Professor of American Studies at University of California, Davis, and author of *Station Identification: A Cultural History of Yiddish Radio in the United States*, for which he studied the Picon scrapbooks. He also serves on the managing board of editors for the AJHS quarterly academic journal *American Jewish History*.

See the exhibition at AJHS/NY through December 2009.
ALTHOUGH MOST OF MOLLY PICON’S theatrical performances are lost to the ages, about half of her appearances in movies and on TV are readily available on DVD or the internet. While she acted onstage virtually nonstop over the eight decades of her career, her screen roles were sporadic and only occasionally showed the breadth she was capable of. But she exuded charm in every role.

In *East and West*, a silent comedy made in Austria in 1923 (when she was 25), Picon plays a New York flapper who travels to her ancestral shtetl in Galicia for a cousin’s wedding. The appeal she radiated onstage is evident in her irrepressible performance. *East and West* DVD can be purchased from the National Center for Jewish Film, but unlike the movies described below it’s not available on Amazon or Netflix. A two-minute clip can be found on Youtube.com.

The 1936 romantic comedy *Yiddle with His Fiddle* (*Yidl mitn Fidl* in Yiddish) was the most successful Yiddish musical of all time. As a poor fiddler who has to pretend she’s a boy, Picon is irresistible—an impish, doe-eyed pixie. It’s a lively, funny movie, shot on location in Warsaw and the small town of Kazimierz. In *Mamele*, a comedy made two years later, Picon manages to play a teenage girl (she was pushing 40) who must look after her rowdy siblings after the death of their mother. For the song “Life Is a Dance,” Picon pulls out all the stops, playing her character’s grandmother at every stage of her life, beginning with a Shirley Temple-esque dance. (Look for it on YouTube.) *Mamele* is believed to be the last Yiddish film made in Poland.

Picon’s first appearance in an American feature was uncredited: She played a Lower East Side shopkeeper in the classic 1948 crime thriller *The Naked City*. Her two-minute performance (Chapter 19 on the DVD) is a bit hammy, but the gritty location shots were always the best part of the movie.

In the early ’60s, Picon played an unflappable widow, Mrs. Bronson, in three episodes of television’s goofy cop show *Car 54, Where Are You?* The series isn’t on DVD, but one two-minute clip can be found on YouTube.com.

Picon’s role in the film *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971) is probably the best, and best known, of her screen performances in English. She plays Yente the matchmaker—crafty and conniving, yet wholly endearing. “Yente had been played on Broadway as a big, buxom woman with a loud, brassy voice.” Picon wrote in her 1980 autobiography, *Molly!* “I offered to play her, instead, as a whining old crone who would speak in a higher, more frightening voice.” To Picon, Yente was “a richer, funnier character much like the ones I had played in the Yiddish theater.”

Some of her other movies were less memorable, but you can watch them on DVD and judge for yourself. In the 1974 comedy *For Pete’s Sake*, a lackluster Barbra Streisand vehicle, Picon has a slightly atypical role as Mrs. Cherry, a madam who lures Babs into working for her. (“You’re like my own daughter, so make me proud of you, yes?”) In the silly 1975 made-for-TV movie *Murder on Flight 502*, she and fellow passenger Walter Pidgeon fall for each other. The 1981 Burt Reynolds racecar comedy *The Cannonball Run* overflows with celebrity cameos; Picon has one forgettable scene near the start, as Roger Moore’s Jewish mother. Her final movie role, in 1984’s abysmal *Cannonball Run II*, consists of one line, delivered gamely: “Would you boys like to stay for dinner? I just made noodle soup.”

In 1981 and ’84 Picon also played Mona, the Holocaust-survivor grandmother of
the chubby boarding school girl Natalie, in two episodes of the sitcom The Facts of Life. In the earlier episode, “From Russia with Love”—available on DVD (Season 3, Disc 1) and online at Hulu.com and IMDB.com—she gives a strong, affecting performance that transcends the heavy-handed context.

Of Picon’s screen appearances that are currently unavailable, the most significant is her first starring role in a Hollywood movie. In 1963’s Come Blow Your Horn (based on Neil Simon’s play), she plays Frank Sinatra’s mother. The character, she says in her autobiography, “was a typical Yiddishe Mama and I slipped into the part like an old shoe.” In his review, the crotchety New York Times critic Bosley Crowther sniffed: “Molly Picon plays the anxious, meddling mama in the old Second Avenue style and has an embarrassing five minutes all alone on the screen answering telephones.” Nevertheless, she received a Golden Globe nomination—her only one—for the performance.

Lawrence Levi is a co-author of The Film Snob’s Dictionary.
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This level of political scrutiny is nothing new. Our community has always paid close attention to the men in the Oval Office. Looking back at America’s first presidents, we can see that even 200 years ago, our founding fathers were dealing with issues that still resonate for American Jews today: discrimination, civil rights, religious liberty, and even Zionism.
“The Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection, should demean themselves as good citizens.”
On August 17, 1790, Moses Seixas, the warden of Congregation Kahal Kadosh Yeshuat Israel, better known as the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, R.I., penned an epistle to George Washington, welcoming the newly elected first president of the United States on his visit to that city. Newport had suffered greatly during the Revolutionary War, invaded and occupied by the British and blockaded by the American navy. Hundreds of residents fled, and many of those who remained were Tories. After the British defeat, the Tories fled in turn. Newport’s 19th-century economy never recovered from these interruptions and dislocations.

Washington’s visit to Newport was largely ceremonial—part of a goodwill tour Washington was making on behalf of the new national government created by the adoption of the Constitution in 1787. Newport had historically been a good home to its Jewish residents, who numbered fewer than 500 at the time of Washington’s visit. The Newport Christian community’s acceptance of Jewish worship was exemplary, although at this time individual Jews did not possess full voting and office holding rights as citizens of Rhode Island. The Jews of Newport looked to the new national government, and particularly to the enlightened president of the United States, to remove the last of the barriers to religious liberty and civil equality confronting American Jewry.

Moses Seixas’s letter on behalf of the Newport congregation—he described them as “the children of the Stock of Abraham”—expressed the Jewish community’s esteem for President Washington. The congregation expressed its pleasure that the God of Israel, who had protected King David, had also protected General Washington and that the same spirit that resided in the bosom of Daniel and allowed him to govern over the “Babylonish Empire” now rested upon Washington. While the rest of world Jewry lived under the rule of monarchs, potentates, and despots, as American citizens the members of the congregation were part of a great experiment: a government “erected by the Majesty of the People” to which Newport Jewry could look to ensure their “invaluable rights as free citizens.”

Seixas expressed his vision of an American government in terms that have become a part of the national lexicon. He beheld in the United States:

A Government which to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance—but generously affording to All liberty of conscience, and immunities of citizenship: deeming every one, of whatever nation, tongue or language equal parts of the great Governmental Machine: This so ample and extensive federal union whose basis is Philanthropy, mutual confidence, and public virtue, we cannot but acknowledge to be the work of the Great God, who ruleth the Armies of Heaven, and among the Inhabitants of the Earth, doing whatsoever seemeth [to Him] good.

Seixas closed his letter to Washington by asking God to send the “Angel who conducted our forefathers through the wilderness into the promised land [to] conduct you through all the difficulties and dangers of this mortal life.” He told Washington of his hope that “when like Joshua full of days, and full of honour, you are gathered to your Fathers, may you be admitted into the Heavenly Paradise to partake of the water of life, and the tree of immortality.”

Not surprisingly, it is Washington’s response, rather than Seixas’s epistle, that is best remembered and most frequently reprinted. Washington began by thanking the congregation for its good wishes and rejoicing that the days of hardship caused by the war were replaced by days of prosperity. Washington then borrowed ideas—and some of the words—directly from Seixas’s letter:

The Citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for giving to Mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy: a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection, should demean themselves as good citizens.

Washington’s concluding paragraph perfectly expresses the ideal relationship among the government, its individual citizens and religious groups:

May the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while every one shall sit under his own vine and figtree, and there shall be none to make him afraid.

The president closed with an invocation: “May the father of all mercies scatter light and not darkness in our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in his own due time and way everlastingly happy.”

The letter, a foundation stone of American religious liberty and separation of church and state, is signed, simply, “G. Washington.” Each year, Newport’s Congregation Kahal Kadosh Yeshuat Israel, now known as the Touro Synagogue, re-reads Washington’s letter in a public ceremony. The words deserve repetition.
The correspondence of John Adams, second president of the United States, reflects the complexity with which Jews and Judaism were viewed in early national America. Most “enlightened” American Christians such as Adams saw Jews as an ancient people who, by enunciating monotheism, laid the groundwork for Christianity. He also saw them as individuals who deserved rights and protection under the law. Like many of his peers, Adams venerated ancient Jews and thought contemporary Jews worthy of respect, but found Judaism, the religion of the Jewish people, an anachronism and the Jewish people candidates for conversion to Christianity.

In an 1808 letter criticizing the depiction of Jews by the French Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire, Adams expressed his respect for ancient Jewry. Adams wrote of Voltaire:

> How is it possible [that he] should represent the Hebrews in such a contemptible light? They are the most glorious nation that ever inhabited this Earth. The Romans and their Empire were but a Bauble in comparison of the Jews. They have given religion to three quarters of the Globe and have influenced the affairs of Mankind more, and more happily, than any other Nation ancient or modern.

Aware of Adams’s benign view of Jews, American Jewish newspaper editor, politician, diplomat, and playwright Mordecai Manuel Noah (1785–1851) maintained a correspondence with the former president. In 1818, Noah delivered a speech consecrating the new building erected by his own Congregation Shearith Israel, the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in New York. Noah’s “Discourse,” a copy of which resides in the archives of the American Jewish Historical Society, focused on the universal history of Jewish persecution at the hands of non-democratic governments and their peoples. An early Zionist, Noah believed that only when the Jewish people were reestablished in their own home, with self-governance, could they live free of oppression. Noah sent a copy of his “Discourse” to Adams.

Adams responded encouragingly to Noah, although the former president was evasive regarding Jewish self-governance. Adams expressed to Noah his personal wish that “your Nation may be admitted to all Privileges of Citizens in every Country of the World.” Adams continued:

> This Country has done much. I wish it may do more, and annul every narrow idea in Religion, Government and Commerce ... It has please the Providence of the ‘first Cause,’ the Universal Cause.
“Syria, Judea and Jerusalem” as Adams would have attended “more to [his] remarks than to those of any traveller I have yet read.” Adams continued,

Farther I could find it in my heart to wish that you had been at the head of a hundred thousand Israelites... & marching with them into Judea & making a conquest of that country & restoring your nation to the dominion of it. For I really wish the Jews again in Judea an independent nation.

What was the source of Adams’s Zionist sympathies? What moved him to make his extraordinary statement? A clue can be found in the next sentence of his letter:

I believe [that]... once restored to an independent government & no longer persecuted they [the Jews] would soon wear away some of the asperities and peculiarities of their character & possibly in time become liberal Unitarian christians for your Jehovah is our Jehovah & your God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob is our God.

Alexis de Tocqueville observed, “The Americans combine notions of Christianity and of liberty so intimately in their minds, that it is impossible to conceive the one without the other.” Adams was clearly confident that freedom would lead the Jewish people to enlightenment and that enlightenment would lead them to Christianity. For Adams, Jewish self-governance in the Holy Land was a step toward their elevation. Today, our understanding of democracy includes respect for diversity and support for the retention of one’s religious faith.
Thomas Jefferson is deservedly a hero to American Jewry. His was one of the few voices in the early republic fervently championing equal political rights for Jews. Jefferson’s Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia is a classic American statement of religious toleration. Significantly, while Jefferson championed Jewish rights, he did not do so out of respect for Judaism, but because he respected the right of every individual to hold whichever faith they wished.

Jefferson’s advocacy of civic equality for American Jewry began as early as 1776, when he co-sponsored a bill—one the Virginia legislature ultimately defeated—that would have allowed Jews, Catholics and other non-Protestants to be naturalized as Virginia citizens. During the debate, Jefferson quoted John Locke’s argument that “neither Pagan nor Mahomedan nor Jew ought to be excluded from the civil rights of the Commonwealth because of his religion.”

Four decades later, in 1820, Jefferson wrote to the Charleston Jewish physician Dr. Jacob De La Motta, “Religious freedom is the most effectual anodyne against religious dissension.” Jefferson told De La Motta that he was delighted to see American Jews assuming full social rights and hoped “they will be seen taking their seats on the benches of science as preparatory to their doing the same at the board of government.”

While Jefferson advocated for the rights of Jews, he held aspects of Judaism in relatively low regard. In fairness, Jefferson opposed all religions based on divine revelation. He believed that God’s existence could be proven by reason and common sense rather than faith. A detractor of all priests, he found those of the Hebrew Bible “a bloodthirsty race, as cruel and remorseless as the being whom they represented as the family of god of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, and the local God of Israel.”

In 1787, Jefferson summed up his view of Jewish revelation in a letter to his nephew, warning him to be skeptical of “those facts in the Bible which contradict the laws of nature.” As one example, he cited the assertion in the Book of Joshua that the sun stood still for several hours. Since that would have meant, in scientific terms, that the earth stood still, Jefferson asked his nephew to consider how the earth, spinning on its axis, could have stopped suddenly and started rotating again without enormous destruction to natural and manmade structures. Similarly, the rationalist Jefferson doubted that God personally inscribed the Ten Commandments on a tablet that Moses later destroyed and then re-wrote.

It bothered Jefferson that the God of the ancient Hebrews was, in his words, “a being of terrific character, cruel, vindictive, capricious and unjust.” He could also not understand how Jews could believe that “the God of infinite justice” would...
“punish the sins of the fathers upon their children, unto the third and fourth generations.” He agreed with the view expressed by John Adams that, in respect to God, “the principle of the Hebrew is fear.”

Jefferson thought that reason and logic demanded a belief in an afterlife, an area in which he found Judaism deficient. Jefferson argued that, without fear of punishment beyond the grave, individuals lacked an incentive to behave well and that, without hope of reuniting with loved ones, family commitments and friendships would lose their gravity. Since Judaism did not universally accept a definitive afterlife, Jefferson thought it a religion without utility.

Despite his reservations about the “defects” he perceived in Judaism, Jefferson never wavered in his commitment to civil and religious freedom for Jews. Jefferson’s most notable achievement in establishing religious and civic toleration for American Jewry was his 1779 Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia. Adopted in 1785, the Bill proclaimed:

\[
\text{No man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested or burdened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer, on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess … their opinions in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise … affect their civil capacities.}
\]

Two years later, in 1787, the citizens of the United States adopted the Constitution. Article VI contains the following, Jefferson-inspired, phrase: “No religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States.”

Despite his attitude toward Judaism as a religion, Jefferson’s advocacy of the rights of Jews—and those of other religious minorities—has become the law and custom of the land. Tolerance of all religions, the absence of an official government religion and the right to practice and express religious thought freely are the hallmarks of Jefferson’s legacy. Despite his private views of Judaism, he was indeed a most “righteous Gentile.”

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Between 1941 and 1945, over half a million Jewish Americans served in this country’s armed forces. Even though their proportions in the ranks of the Army, Navy, and Marines were actually greater than the percentage of Jews in the general population, the widespread anti-Semitic innuendo that Jews avoided military service persisted. To counter this libel, and to assist in meeting the needs of Jewish servicemen and women and their families during and after the war, the National Jewish Welfare Board commenced a nationwide survey of Jews in the military, noting those killed, wounded, missing, taken prisoner, or receiving awards. A significant portion of the resulting survey information survives among AJHS holdings. The collection consists of general administrative files, geographically arranged files regarding the survey, extensive files on casualties among and awards to Jewish military personnel, and several series of card indexes, including a Master File of casualties and awards arranged alphabetically by name. The Master File contains an estimated 87,000 cards!

Records of military personnel of the World War II era are especially precious because most of the U.S. Government’s official records were destroyed in a massive fire at the National Archives National Personnel Records Center in Overland, Mo., on July 12, 1973. This project will help make an alternative source of military service information available.

The cards and corresponding files of the Bureau of War Records provide both an overview of the broad scope of American Jewish military involvement in the war and poignant snapshot histories of individual soldiers and sailors and their families. Hobbies, high school and college alma maters, fraternities and sororities, civilian occupations, wartime marriages, and even quotes from letters home are recorded for thousands of enlisted men and women, along with the details of their deaths, disappearances, and injuries. The anguish of loved ones of those suffering casualties is evident in the correspondence, questionnaire responses, and related documents accompanying the survey forms.

AJHS will re-house the documents in archival-quality boxes and folders. A finding aid to the collection will be mounted and searchable via the web. Digital copies of the index cards will be readable online, and a master index of names will make a search for relatives easy!

Jewish Welfare Board Bureau of War Records
Mordecai Sheftall Papers

Born in Savannah in 1735 to one of the first Jewish families in the Colony of Georgia, Mordecai Sheftall was Commissary General for Georgia’s Continental troops in 1777 and 1778 before he and his son were captured and taken prisoner by the British. Today his papers are among the most important collections of the Revolutionary War era held by the American Jewish Historical Society.

The Mordecai Sheftall Papers, consisting of over 3,000 documents, are a rich chronicle of his service to the emerging nation, and a wealth of topics such as the makeup of the Continental militia, the presence of women among military units, the trafficking in and treatment of slaves, the treatment of the sick and injured, and the diet and clothing of both soldiers and civilians.

The collection is currently in such poor physical condition that it cannot be used for research or exhibition. Thanks to a major grant from Save America’s Treasures, a federal funding program, the Mordecai Sheftall Papers will first be sent to an experienced paper conservator who will clean and mend the documents; de-acidify the paper; place single leaves in mylar folders; and place sewn gatherings and bound volumes in appropriate enclosures. Before being microfilmed and digitized, the collection will be returned temporarily to AJHS, where it will be organized appropriately and a finding aid created for posting online. The collection will then be microfilmed and digitally scanned—the former to ensure long-term preservation of the contents and the latter to facilitate access.

American Jewish Congress

The American Jewish Congress was organized in 1916 under the leadership of Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, philanthropist Nathan Straus, Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis, and other American Jewish leaders. It was formally established in 1918 as a democratic and representative instrument of the American Jewish community to present a unified voice at the 1919 Versailles Peace Conference. Soon thereafter, recognizing that the rights of Jews in the United States could not be protected unless the rights of all were equally assured, it added to its mission the promotion of civil rights and religious freedom for every American regardless of race, religion, or national origin. AJ Congress thus pioneered the dominant anti-discrimination strategy of 20th century American Jewry, forming alliances with other vulnerable racial and ethnic groups to bring about legal changes to promote equality for all.

In 1969 and 2004, AJHS was given a vast range of AJ Congress organizational records, including its Commissions on International Affairs, Community Interrelations, Women’s Equality (now Women’s Empowerment), National Affairs, Urban Affairs, Jewish Communal Affairs, and Law and Social Action, totaling over 1,200 cartons. The contents are a veritable history of American Jewish engagement in national and international affairs.

The records document such historical events and currents as the Holocaust and American Jewry’s response to it, Brown v. Board of Education, reproductive rights, the plight of Soviet Jewry, censorship, freedom of religion, cults and hate groups, terrorism, breast cancer in Ashkenazi women, the Arab-Israeli conflict, nursing homes, the fine points of back-channel diplomacy, and hundreds of other topics. Several thousand photographs document landmark events such as the 1933 mass rallies organized by AJ Congress in New York to protest the Nazi persecution of German Jews, and the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, of which AJ Congress was a prominent sponsor.

A two-year grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities will allow AJHS to make all of the AJ Congress records available for research. Archivists will examine and reorganize the collection; re-house the collection to preserve it; provide access via a detailed online finding aid; and digitize selected documents (10,000 pages, 500 photographs, and 100 hours of audio recordings) so anyone can view them online.

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